

Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*

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The question of the family is at the heart of many important political issues. Platonism poses a special challenge to Christianity because the individual is lost in the abstract universal and the historical event is of no consequence. Christianity affirms the goodness of marriage and the importance of the complementary differences between male and female. Christianity is a creed based upon the recognition of the unique event of the Incarnation and measures history by that event. Aristotle sees the importance of family as the basis for community, but he does not adequately establish the significance of the individual and the intrinsic goodness of marriage and family. The superiority and sovereignty of the political regime overshadow the family. Although Aristotle makes important strides beyond Plato, his philosophy still bears the mark of a rationalist and monistic metaphysics that is an unwarranted imposition upon Christian theology. The true humanism will take nothing less than the restoration through the new Adam, an embrace of the true religion, and a metaphysics of esse, or metaphysics of the gift. Blessed John Paul II made some important contributions to this deepening of the integral humanism through his work on the phenomenology of love, through his work on Gaudium et spes, and through his work on the theology of the body and family which he developed during his papacy.

Introduction

I am delighted to accept this invitation to speak about political philosophy and the connection between metaphysics and politics. Professor McMahon stated the following problem for our consideration: how can we understand and protect “the significance of the differentiated individual,” particularly “the intrinsic significance of human sexual difference, of the individual as male and female.” Platonism, with its concentration upon eternal form and the ideal essence, poses a special challenge to Christianity because the individual is lost in the abstract universal and the historical event is of no consequence. Christianity affirms the goodness of marriage and the importance of the complementary differences between male and female. Christianity is a creed based upon the recognition of the unique event of the Incarnation and measures history by that event. So, indeed, Platonism would not be a suitable basis for Christian theology.

In his excellent article, “Liberation and the Catholic Church: The Illusion and the Reality,” Fr. Donald Keefe points out that “Christian and Catholic political theology can have no other foundation than the social reality, the praxis, which is the worship of the Lord of history.”¹ Fr. Keefe warns us that “the imposition of the prior truth of any non-Christian historical consciousness upon Christianity is always the perversion of faith.”² Thus, both the contemporary ideologies of liberal progressivism and Marxist socialism also distort the faith; both also argue that the family is an obstacle to progress and the full realization of a just political society. The

¹ Donald Keefe, “Liberation and the Catholic Church: The Illusion and the Reality,” *Center Journal* (Winter 1981), 55.

² Keefe, “Liberation,” 52.

political philosophy of Aristotle has served as an important resource for many thinkers to combat the errors and distortions of contemporary political philosophers such as Marx and Rawls. Indeed, the philosophy of Aristotle has been incorporated in much of Catholic social thinking, especially through the work of Thomas Aquinas and through the Thomistic revival of the twentieth century. Maritain, Simon, Rommen and others made extensive use of Aristotle's political philosophy. Thus, for this conference I immediately thought that the best approach to the problem posed by Professor McMahon would simply be to review his criticism of Plato's *Republic* in *Politics*, Book II. But in light of Fr. Keefe's penetrating account of Trinitarian theology I came to realize that we would be brought up short with such a strategy. For we see that Aristotle does not adequately establish the significance of the individual and the goodness of marriage and family. The superiority and sovereignty of the political regime overshadow the family. For although Aristotle makes important strides beyond Plato, his philosophy still bears the mark of a rationalist and monistic metaphysics that Father Keefe sees as an unwarranted imposition upon Christian theology. Among those impositions Father Keefe mentions "the fault of the Aristotelian sociology of the 'perfect society' so much relied upon by Scholastic thinkers." (54).³ This serves sufficient warning to the Aristotelian who would remove the speck from the eye of Plato and fail to see the beam in his own.

With that warning in mind, we have good reason to study the great dispute between Plato and Aristotle on the family and the *polis*, and I think that we would do well to make that dispute the focus of our conversation. First, both Plato and Aristotle reflected deeply upon the foundation and purpose of the political society. Their different but complementary accounts of the regime are helpful for understanding political phenomena, and their accounts are illustrative of the metaphysical principles they developed in other works. It is helpful in this case to take a more indirect look at metaphysical principles. The question of the family is at the heart of many important political questions. The debate concerning the status of the family in the *polis* is due to their differences in method and metaphysics. As in the famous picture of Raphael, "The School of Athens," Plato points upwards towards the heavens while Aristotle spreads his hand downwards over the earth. So Plato wishes to discover the form of justice, the perfect city in speech, and he readily abandons the realm of becoming. The family, more concretely rooted in the things of the earth and the realm of becoming, suffers as a result. His analysis of regimes begins with the kingship of the wise and finds all subsequent regimes deficient, from timocracy, oligarchy, democracy to tyranny. Aristotle, hand spread out over the earth, discovers the true origin and fourfold explanation of existing cities and therefore revels in particular instantiations and the inner differentiation of concrete things. The family receives a very positive treatment; for his analysis of regimes he looks through many particular constitutions and discovers the six-fold classification of three good and three bad regimes. It was inevitable that Aristotle would find a

³ Keefe, "Liberation," 52. "Whereas in pagan wisdom the logic of such monisms immediately generated sets of corresponding dualisms between primordial principles, permanently irreconcilable, of unity and multiplicity." Donald J. Keefe, *Covenantal Theology: The Eucharistic Order of History*, 2 vols. in 1 (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1996), 5; "Either one permits the monist logic, whether of Plato or Aristotle, to have its head in a true autonomy of reason as contemporary science and humanism seem desirous of doing . . ." (8).

quarrel with his former teacher. The issue of the family and property was just such a place to find it.

The family represents nature in its clearest manifestation. The mutual attraction of the male and female, the veneration of the power of fertility and procreation, and the enduring social form of the family plant it squarely in the middle of political society. The family is said to be the basic cell of all human society, the primary association of human beings. The mutual influence and inevitable tensions of the family and the *polis* extend throughout the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. On the one hand, the *polis* must draw upon the naturalness of the family for its own legitimacy and justification. Because the family is the prior and more fundamental form of association, the political association must be derived from its extension, development, or absorption. On the other hand, the city represents the excellence of human striving in its most conspicuous form. The family must join into the political association for its own protection, fulfillment, and endurance. Just how that mutual influence exerts itself and how the relationship between the family and city should be envisioned opens up one of the great debates of Greek philosophy. Plato paradoxically eliminates the family in attempting to appropriate its naturalness. Aristotle paradoxically preserves the family but projects a perfect society or a self-sufficient association whose end or purpose subverts the fundamental significance of the family.

A re-examination of the dispute between Plato and Aristotle on the family and the *polis* will provide many benefits. First, it will help us to highlight the peculiar danger of Platonism as a political philosophy and the snares of its metaphysical vision of the idea. Second, we have much to learn from Aristotle's appreciation of natural purpose and the levels of perfection of the human person in society. There is a long-standing renewal of interest in the ancient political philosophy and the problem of the ancients and moderns. This is due in part to concerns about the loss of the notion of nature and purpose, the neglect of virtue, and the absence of moderation and respect for limits of political power. We fear the "Abolition of Man" and the onset of tyranny as the crisis of our time.⁴ As C. S. Lewis has so well explained in *Abolition of Man*, mastery of nature means mastery of some men over men. Technology has brought us to the brink of destruction through war; it has unleashed great new possibilities for the degradation of human beings; it has despoiled the environment. It has allowed the tyrant's fist to hammer harder on the vulnerabilities of human beings through the media, mass brainwashing, and means of espionage and terror. We have abandoned ancient principles of moral education and now wonder where to turn to find the moral wisdom to guide the great power which we have unleashed. Lewis is not unique in wondering whether some kind of repentance or return to ancient philosophy may be in order. The return to the ancient is a way to recover a sense of nature. Will the ancient philosophy really provide a sufficient basis for the restoration of the dignity of the human being and the defense of freedom? Will the recovery of political wisdom suffice? Are the principles of nature the solution for our woes?

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Macmillan, 1947); Leo Strauss, "The Crisis of our Time" in Harold J. Spaeth, *The Predicament of Modern Politics* (University of Detroit Press, 1964).

Fr. Keefe challenges us to see that the source of the problem lies in Greek political philosophy as a whole, not Platonism alone. In addition, we can learn from the historical achievements and failures of Greece and Rome that the love of wisdom, the praise of the virtues, and the respect for nature do not suffice for the achievement of freedom and the restoration of human dignity. Plato and Aristotle could not save Athens from its folly, nor could Cicero save the republic. In the *City of God*, Augustine documents in great detail the problem of pagan political order and the various strengths and shortcomings of their virtues. We also learn from history that Christianity has been the source for the development of a rich social order. As Keefe rightly says:

Out of that worship, in which the gift is appropriated by the people of God, a new understanding of the dignity and meaning of our humanity has entered the world, against an enormous resistance—the resistance which is our fallenness, our fear and dread of our own reality, our own history, our own freedom and responsibility. Over the nineteen hundred and fifty years of this Eucharistic worship, the pagan despair of human worth has been pushed back, not by theory, not by law, not by charismatic leadership, but by the continual and cumulative appropriation by the people in the pews of the reality which is given them in this worship. It is this dawning consciousness of the reality of dignity and freedom which has been and continues to be the one principle of novelty and ferment in the world: it is this which church doctrine and law and mission articulate and defend and propagate, but do not create. This slow, often hesitant, often betrayed but finally irreversible and indefeasible history of our common salvation is at the same time the entry of every human being informed by that worship into that realm of responsibility for a uniquely personal concreation of the kingdom of Christ; it is an acceptance of personal responsibility for the future which bars as sinful, as a rejection of the good creation, every resubmergence of that individual into the anonymity of a faceless mass and a featureless, meaningless present.⁵

Truly to avoid the abolition of man, we will need both nature and grace, faith and reason. Let's begin with the philosophical understanding of the family and the *polis*.

On Platonic Political Philosophy

To be fair to Plato, it is important to place the proposal for the community of women and children in the context of the elaborate dialogue, *The Republic: On Justice*. The dialogue opens with the challenge posed by the sophist, Thrasymachus: Is justice by nature or by convention? He makes the case that justice conflicts with our natural desires and that its origins lie in a contract made for mutual benefit and the protection of the weak. Socrates builds up the various

⁵ Keefe, "Liberation," 55-56. Also, "In this moment of appropriation and conversion, we enter into our personal history through the recognition and affirmation of our personal truth, our union with Christ . . . in this worship, the personal appropriation of truth, of freedom, of responsibility and of community coincide in the only true historical consciousness, that of covenantal existence, existence in Christ" (Keefe, *Covenantal Theology*, 12).

layers of the city in speech in order to discover the nature of justice and to demonstrate against the sophists that a life of justice is superior to its opposite. The city in speech begins with the simple needs of the body; they add on the luxurious city to account for the diversity of interests and desires; and then they must “purge” the city in order to cultivate guardians. Justice is the right ordering of the soul in the city. It is accompanied by courage, temperance, and prudence. Justice as a right ordering of the soul is essential to human flourishing and tyranny is the misery of the soul. That is the context for all that transpires in the *Republic*. This is an important achievement in political philosophy. As George Parkin Grant explains: “In this account, justice is not a certain set of external political arrangements which are a useful means of the realization of our self-interests; it is the very inward harmony of human beings in terms of which they are able to calculate their self-interest properly. The outward regime mirrors what is inward among the dominant people of that regime, and vice versa. Within that account, justice could then be described as the calculation of self-interest, as long as it is understood that at the centre of that self-interest is justice itself. For justice is the inward harmony which makes a self truly a self (or in more accurate language which today sounds archaic: Justice in its inward appearance is the harmony which makes the soul truly a soul.”⁶ Socrates pursues a theory of political order in order to display the soul. The city is the soul writ large. The city and the soul display three parts: the rulers, the guardians, and the workers; reason, spiritedness, and appetite.

The guardians prove to be a peculiar and troubling part of the city, as spiritedness is the troubling part of the soul. Spiritedness is a third part of the soul between desire and reason; it is a form of anger and it is connected to convictions of right and wrong. It is the key to moral education and the key to citizenship as such.⁷ The Socratic definition of courage is intriguing: courage is the preservation of the opinions established by law and education about what is to be feared (*Republic* 429c). There is an additional reason for the importance of educating guardians in the *Republic*: to develop a better understanding of the relationship between spiritedness and courage, on the one hand, and reason and wisdom, on the other. How does one overcome fear of death and love of gain to develop a staunch courage ready to defend the city at all costs? First, there must be a suitable education. Courage depends upon an education by a regime concerning what is most important. Courage is primarily a matter of conviction and training. So there must also be imposed upon the guardian a strict way of life removing sources of temptation, especially property and money. (These are remarkably constant demands upon the military profession, to some degree, at all times and in all places.⁸) The combination of the elaborate testing of the guardians to find who is most suitable is done so as to discern whether the guardian can hold on to the right convictions in the face of “robbery, bewitchment and force” (*Republic* 413b).

⁶ George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Notre Dame Press, 1985), 44-45.

⁷ On the middle part of the soul, see C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), chap. 1, “Men without Chests.”

⁸ “The military man must forgo personal advantage, lucre, and prosperity.” Samuel P. Huntington, “Military Mind,” in M. Wakin, *War, Morality and the Military Profession*, 2nd edition (Boulder: Westview, 1986), 40. On the training of a good Marine, see the novel by Edwin McDowell, *To Keep Our Honor Clean*, (New York: Vanguard Press, 1980).

In the course of the conversation about the guardians, it becomes clear that the understanding of the role of the family is radically transformed. The training strips away all private attachments and any sense of “one’s own” so that the public good and the city itself are the object of one’s affection. And the very idea of the family, the relationship of brother and sister, must be transferred to the city. Thus, this education requires a “noble lie.” The lie consists of the story of common origins, within the earth. The noble lie appropriates the naturalness of the family and transfers it to the city. The citizens will be considered as brothers and sisters. It should lead the guardian (and any citizen as such) to “care more for the city and for one another” (*Republic* 415d).

Here we reach three great quandaries about guardianship, and indirectly about citizenship: are the guardians happy in light of their sacrifice, is it possible to produce and maintain such communal beings, and how much must be covered over and who does the covering? Is it really possible, and is it desirable, for individuals to give up property and family, surrender individual ambition and desire, and become indoctrinated? It is doubtful that Plato meant to say that an actual city should try such extreme measures. Some interpret this entire argument as a comic interlude and as constituted by a deliberate abstraction from the body.⁹

The section points towards the deeper issue concerning philosophy and the city. For if justice is primarily an ordering of the city and the soul, that is, if it is an inner harmony of the parts, not a matter of following rules or minding “external business,”¹⁰ then justice presupposes a hierarchy of value within the city and the soul.¹¹ In addition, justice as well as courage requires the formation of the soul and inculcation of opinion. This is where Plato’s solution requires a further element—in addition to the life of the guardian, we must also discover the life of the philosopher.¹² All of the virtues derive from speculative wisdom and depend upon external props or sources. The ideal of ordering in the soul sets the stage for the brilliant analysis of political regimes in terms of the degeneration of the soul from timocracy, oligarchy, democracy to tyranny. This allows the group to come to the salutary conclusion that the way of justice is preferable to the way of tyranny and injustice. For this purpose a city in speech is sufficient (592b).

Socrates must deal with objections brought against the perfect city in speech he has crafted. There are three objections, or “three waves” in opposition to the proposed just city (457b-d, 472a, 473c-d). The three points of opposition concern: 1) the equality of men and women, 2) the community of women and children, and 3) the rule of the philosopher king. Socrates suggests that the third wave is the largest wave and the most formidable, not the two objections about equality of women or the community of women and children. The paradox of the philosopher king is the idea that he clearly has the most interest in explaining and unraveling.

⁹ Alan Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” in *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), and John Sallis, *Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue*, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

¹⁰ See *Republic*, 443a-444a.

¹¹ See *Republic*, 538c-e; 557b-562.

¹² See *Republic* 486b, 500c; *Apology* 29b.

The first wave concerning the equality of men and women he makes some interesting arguments so as to nullify the differences between men and women as if they were no more than the length of one's hair. But he uses the opportunity of the equality of training to emphasize the point that philosophers must be willing to entertain any hypothesis without shame; so to discuss the exercising of the men and women together in the gym is a test of the philosophical nature of the interlocutors. Socrates also establishes the twofold criteria of possibility and desirability as a set of questions for examining the proposals. That is, he inquires whether these arrangements are best for the city and whether the arrangements are at all possible.

Now we need to focus more on the second wave, the second objection to the community of women and children: "All these women are to belong to all these men in common, and no woman is to live privately with any man. And the children, in their turn, will be in common, and neither will a parent know his offspring, nor a child his parent" (457d). The community of women and children is a proposal for the guardian class. The guardian must seek above all to identify with the common good. Both private property and a particular family distract the soul of the guardian. Hence Socrates proposes the community of property, women and children to fulfill the conditions necessary for a pure guardian. The extreme conditions required for guardianship, however, require a separate camp at a distance from the society which it serves. Therefore, the community of women and children follows from some previous points already established in the dialogue: there must be formed a Guardian class, selected because of their spirited natures, educated to love what is noble, living with common houses and mess halls, with the exclusion of private property, and mixing together in gymnastic exercise. In other words, all of the previous practices made by the regime for the Guardian class culminate in the objection of the second wave. Is this way of life possible? Is the way of life desirable? Socrates hopes to put off the question whether the proposal is possible; he will consider its possibility together with the questions concerning philosopher king.

Curiously, he appears most confident in asserting the desirability of the way of life. Socrates puts forward the fundamental principles to the solution. We arrive at last at the two very problematic aspects of Platonic political philosophy. Unity is put forward as the greatest good for the city. And the body is defined negatively, as the point of non-absorption into the common; it is treated as a secondary or non-essential feature of being human; sexuality is treated as a mere animal phenomenon.

On the unity of the city, Socrates questions: "have we any greater evil for a city than what splits it and makes it many instead of one? Or a greater good than what binds it together and makes it one?" Socrates seeks a community of pleasure and pain which would bind the city together "to the greatest extent possible" such that the same births and deaths are celebrated by all the citizens alike. The privacy of birth and death, the realm of the family itself, is dissolved for the unity of the city. And to bring his point home, he says that the citizens should utter the phrase "my own" and "not my own" at the same time in the city about the same thing in the same way. So on his analogy the city is best governed which is most like a single human being. Earlier he had to establish the parallel of the city and the soul when it came to virtue since he said that

the city is the soul writ large. But there he seemed to accept a difference between the two; whereas in this case he makes a more literal identification of the city with the human being as one individual. With this arrangement all the members of the city are like the fellow guardians of the city, concerning whom Socrates says at 463c, “With everyone he happens to meet, he’ll hold that he’s meeting a brother, or a sister, or a father, or a mother, or a son, or a daughter or their descendants or ancestors.” No citizen considers another citizen as an outsider but considers each to be one of his own. The natural family is the standard for the political society because of the unity that it engenders. And he goes on to say that the community of pain and pleasure is now the greatest good for us. So the community of women and children among the exhibit areas has turned out to be the cause of the greatest good to our city (464b). And this is where Socrates retrieves the notion from the previous book that there is no private property, no private houses, nor land nor any possession. He says that is a condition that they receive a wage for guarding and that they spend it in common “if they are really going to be guardians” (464c). This principle will eliminate the formation of faction, and he further claims that the rest of the city will not split into factions.

On the negativity of the body: it is a very simple thing, he said, that the guardians will be “led by an inner natural necessity to sexual mixing with one another” (458d). Glaucon responds that these are not “geometrical but erotic necessities.” Now the reason I flagged that particular sentence is the recognition of a natural basis for sexual union. At least on the level of what he calls the natural necessity. In fact, later he will say the regime can outlaw various kinds of sexual acts depending on whether they are right or wrong, holy or unholy, but he says that no law can be made against heterosexual coupling. So the question becomes: how can they make heterosexual coupling beneficial to the city? Socrates compares human marriage to the coupling of animals. And with the breeding of animals one seeks to breed the best when they are in their prime. So we have the degradation of the sexual even among those who are the most noble. There is a dualism between body and soul; and in order to arrange for the best to have intercourse with the best, he says that there must be a throng of lies and deceptions for the benefit of the ruled (459c). What is a benefit to the city is twofold: first, the breeding of the best specimens to become guardians for the city, and second, control of the size of the city, so that the city stays within the limits of the possible and becomes neither too big nor too little (460a). The city will supervise the nursing children. There will be strict supervision of the relationships between the sexes who are of the age of fertility; but those beyond the age of procreation, he says, are free to have intercourse with whomsoever they wish except with their own family members. Obviously that rule cannot be implemented given the community of women and children, so he comes up with a fantastic rule concerning time of birth—a clearly absurd rule which, as Allan Bloom points out, has very little hold on the behavior of the guardians.

What I have attempted to do is give Plato a fair examination to see whether it is true that Platonism is detrimental to the development of Catholic political theology. Although many fine lessons are to be learned from Plato about the political order and the nature of the soul and the virtues, there is no doubt a problem with the ultimate metaphysical basis for the city. Extreme

unity is achieved at the expense of the individual; and the body is a negative limit of justice and community. Can we rely on Aristotle to extract us from these problems?

On Aristotle's Political Philosophy

Aristotle goes a long way in restoring balance and practical reasonableness to the realm of politics. Rather than look at the ideal city, or the city in speech, Aristotle looks at actual cities and their constitutions, their achievements, and failures. By using both a genetic and analytic methods, he connects the family and the city. Through the genetic method he looks at the coming to be of the city, not just the order of essence. With a background in philosophy of nature, he is interested in change (*ens mobile*) and defines nature as the “source or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself and not in virtue of a concomitant attribute” (192b23); in other words, to have an interest in nature is to have an interest in what is changeable, not just what is ideal. In the realm of nature there exist composite beings, i.e., individual beings. To understand composite beings, one must look at their four-fold causes: material, formal, efficient, and final. Political science must look at all four causes: the material includes the people, the territory, the economic basis and families; the formal is the regime type or constitutional arrangement of the offices; the efficient causes are the founders and legislators; and the final cause is designated by the good life, excellence, or human flourishing.

The main thesis of Aristotle's political philosophy is that the city and the family are essentially distinct associations, but connected through a natural teleology by which the city completes the family as the perfect society. The city is a community or an association of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good. The city or the political community is said to be the highest of all, but in a way that includes and embrace the other communities such as the family. The highest good of the political community embraces the other goods and does not destroy them or absorb them. And no doubt, with Plato foremost in his mind, he asserts that it is a mistake to think that the statesman, the King, the householder, and the master of slaves are the same and that they do not differ in kind (1252a7-18). Aristotle says that this truth would be **evident** to anyone who considers the matter according to the method of resolution of the compound into its elements or parts, that is, into its material cause. He further says to get the **clearest view** of the city one must consider it in its growth and origin. The family must be understood if the city is to be understood properly. Political philosophy begins with a consideration of the family on its own terms as a natural association, as a primary association, and not simply as a variable in an abstract schema for the best regime.

According to Aristotle there are a number of factors that characterize the family, such as 1) the fundamental human lack of self-sufficiency, 2) reproduction of the species, 3) the satisfaction of daily needs, 4) the necessity of labor, possibly including the use of slaves, 5) the rearing and education of children, and 6) worship of the gods.¹³ Aristotle's first description of the

¹³ Aristotle's reference to religion and the pre-political is only oblique, and it is about the village and the irrationality of religion. See 1252b24-26. In Bk VII religion is public, e.g., 1330a9-14, 1329a26-33, 1335b12-17; but consider the

family is as follows: “there must necessarily be a union or pairing of those who cannot exist without one another. Male and female must unite for the reproduction of the species, not from deliberate intention, but from the natural impulse which exists in animals generally and also exists in plants to leave behind them something of the same nature as themselves” (1252a26-31). Like Plato’s first city in speech, family association emerges out of human neediness and the lack self-sufficiency (*Republic* 369b). The first city in speech, called by Glaucon “the city of pigs,” emphasizes the satisfaction of every day needs, particularly those of the body and the need for food, shelter and clothing. It is interesting that Socrates does not even mention the pairing of male and female as one of the needs marking the origin of human association; children mysteriously appear at the conclusion of the account of the city, along with the gods (372a-b). Aristotle, on the other hand, first mentions the phenomenon of “pairing” and thus emphasizes reproduction. Reproduction is an activity shared in common with living things, animals and plants. Association for reproduction is the most obvious association rooted in nature, a sign of radical lack of self-sufficiency, and sustained by a natural desire or impulse leads to the generation of children of the family.¹⁴ Aristotle says it is not by deliberation, but by natural impulse or desire. The political association arises more through deliberation. The natural formation of a family association will provide a basis for Aristotle to claim a natural basis for the political association, through the teleology of associations and by following the inner trajectory of the overcoming of the lack of self-sufficiency. In this way he preserves the inner differentiation of associations. We will explore this in more detail below. But we should note that Plato claims a natural basis for the political association only by usurping the family function and terminology through the noble lie: “their country being their mother and also their nurse, they are bound to advise for her good, and to defend her against attacks, and her citizens they are to regard as children of the earth and their own brothers” (*Republic* 414d).

Aristotle acknowledges that the family is more natural than the *polis*; as he explains in the *Ethics*, on friendship, the family, the union of husband and wife is more natural than the city. He says:

Between man and wife friendship seems to exist by nature; for man is naturally inclined to form couples—even more than to form cities, inasmuch as the household is earlier and more necessary than the city, and reproduction is more common to man with the animals. (1162a16-19)

following: “Generation alone was not the foundation of the ancient family. . . . The members of the ancient family were united by something more powerful than birth, affection, or physical strength: this was the religion of the sacred fire, and of dead ancestors.” Fustel De Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study On The Religion, Laws, And Institutions Of Greece And Rome* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Doubleday Edition, no date), 41-42; but see all of section II, 40-112.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas notes: “It was necessary that woman should be made, as the Scripture says, as a helper to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (hereafter *ST*), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1981), 1.92.1, p. 466. Or again, “Woman is taken in man’s society for the needs of generation.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter *SCG*), trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1956) 3.123.3, p. 147.

The natural basis for the family affords it a special status in the consideration of human association. The family association is “earlier” and “more necessary” than the city, and this constitutes a sign of its naturalness. Of course, the problem of dualism of man’s animal and rational nature will return at some point in this account of the family. The association also serves the fundamental differentiation of tasks in the economy or household dedicated to the survival and maintenance of life:

With the other animals the union extends only to this point, but human beings live together not only for the sake of reproduction but also for the various purposes of life; for from the start the functions are divided, and those of man and woman are different; so they help each other by throwing their peculiar gifts into the common stock. It is for these reasons that both utility and pleasure seem to be found in this kind of friendship. (1162a19-26)

The husband-wife relationship develops to the level of virtue or excellence.

But this friendship may be based also on virtue, if the parties are good; for each has its own virtue and they will delight in the fact. And children seem to be a bond of union (which is the reason why childless people part more easily); for children are a good common to both and what is common holds them together. (1162a26-28)

The friendship of the husband and wife in virtue also signifies a political relationship. As he says in the *Politics*, the rule of the husband over the wife is said to be “political” and neither despotic nor paternalistic (1259a39-1259b15).

The naturalness of the family arising out of reproduction brings to light another aspect of human nature. In the *Politics* Aristotle says that the couple “leaves behind an image of themselves” (1252a30). Beyond the association of male and female or husband and wife, there is the good of the species. The species is also a good beyond the city, as such, and reflects the cosmic ordering. In another text Aristotle says that reproduction is the most natural act of the living organism, and by such an act a living organism participates in the eternity of God. It participates in the unending endurance of the species.¹⁵ The perpetuity of the species, the

¹⁵ “The most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible. The phrase ‘for the sake of which’ is ambiguous; it may mean either the end to achieve which, or the being in whose interest, the act is done. Since then no living thing is able to partake in what is eternal and divine by uninterrupted continuance (for nothing perishable can for ever remain one and the same), it tries to achieve that end in the only way possible to it, and success is possible in varying degrees; so it remains not indeed as the self-same individual but continues its existence in something like itself—not numerically but specifically one” (*De anima*, II, 4, 415a25-415b7). See also *Generation and Corruption*, II.10: “Now being (we have explained elsewhere the variety of meanings we recognize in this term) is better than not-being; but not all things can possess being, since they are too far removed from the

participation in the larger more enduring reality, is also a point of attraction for the city. The city claims for itself an unending existence. It also must perpetuate itself for the future. It is a temptation for the city to usurp the divine being.¹⁶

Another characteristic of the family association is the satisfaction of daily recurrent needs. The household is the first basis for the economy. The proper value of things in their use serves as a ready standard by which to subordinate acquisition and exchange. Slaves are included as part of the household for the sake of necessary labor and to serve as instruments for the action of the master. The controversial question concerning Aristotle's endorsement of natural slavery need not detain us at this point. At the very least, he saw the need to accept slavery in its conventional form as a necessity of a harsh existence helping to maintain the excellence of a few. We will, however, keep it in mind for our conclusion about the achievement of Aristotle's political philosophy.

The last two characteristics of the family, education of children and religious worship, lead more directly to the political association. At the conclusion of the *Ethics*, Aristotle praises Sparta for being alone in taking care for the education of the young).¹⁷ And in Book VII and VIII of the *Politics* the theme of education sponsored by the political association is developed in detail. As mentioned above, Aristotle has very little to say about the religious function of the family. In Book VII Aristotle is very solicitous about the public provision for priests and temples.¹⁸ If Fustel de Coulanges is accurate, religion is the one area where rivalry with the families manifests itself and requires the creation by the city of new rituals and worship of the gods.¹⁹

principle. God therefore adopted the remaining alternative, and fulfilled the perfection of the universe by making coming-to-be uninterrupted; for the greatest possible coherence would thus be secured to existence, because that coming-to-be should itself come-to-be perpetually is the closest approximation to eternal being" (336b25-35). See Joseph Owens, in *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics* (Toronto: the University of Toronto Press, 1963). See also Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.98.1.

¹⁶ I find it interesting how close Abraham Lincoln comes to such usurpation in his speech, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois (January 27, 1838): "Let those materials be moulded into *general intelligence, sound morality*, and in particular, *a reverence for the constitution and laws*: and, that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last; that we revered his name to the last; that, during his long sleep, we permitted no hostile foot to pass over or desecrate his resting place; shall be that which to learn the last trump shall awaken our WASHINGTON. Upon these let the proud fabric of freedom rest, as the rock of its basis; and as truly as has been said of the only greater institution, '*the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*'"

¹⁷ "In the Spartan state alone, or almost alone, the legislator seems to have paid attention to questions of nurture and occupations; in most states such matters have been neglected, and each man lives as he pleases, Cyclops-fashion, 'to his own wife and children dealing law.' Now it is best that there should be a public and proper care for such matters; but if they are neglected by the community it would seem right for each man to help his children and friends towards virtue, and that they should have the power, or at least the will, to do this" (1180a25).

¹⁸ Listing the functions of the city, Aristotle includes food, arts, arms, revenue; then he says, "fifth or rather first, there must be care for religion, which is commonly called worship" (1328b5-15); see also 1329a 26-33, 1331b4-18, 1336b15-22. There are also meals devoted to hearing the bards, who would no doubt sing of the gods and heroes (1338a25-30).

¹⁹ De Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 117-120, 126-133.

By considering the origins or the “coming to be” of the *polis*, Aristotle establishes the naturalness of the city. Through its relationship to the family, which is clearly a natural association, the city exists by nature. The city completes, fulfills, or perfects the family as a natural association, and as the final cause or *telos* of the human association of family, it is also natural. The family comes into existence for life and the *polis* for the good life. The analysis of Harry Jaffa is very useful in explaining this dynamic teleological relationship of family and city: the family comes into existence for the sake of life and thereby initiates something that it cannot complete.²⁰ For the reproduction of life is the initiation of a new *human* life; to generate a new human being requires in addition to food, shelter, clothing also greater social skills, virtues and education. The exchange of goods requires a greater differentiation than the family can provide. And the defense against hostile others requires the aid of the city with its military and other defenses. Education requires something more than a family or village: “now in men rational principle and mind are the end towards which nature strives, so that the birth and the moral discipline of the citizen ought to be ordered with a view toward them.” (*Politics* VII.15, 1334b14-16). The family as it functions and develops understands its lack of sufficiency and becomes part of a larger association called the village, which is in colony or offshoot from a family. He says the village will satisfy something more than daily recurring needs. He doesn’t elaborate on these but goes on to say that true sufficiency is established in the *polis*, not primarily because of sufficient economic diversity and the provision of defense, but most of all for the establishment of justice, and perhaps most of all the education of the young in the way of the city.

There is a distinction between the family and the *polis* even though they are connected through the natural development of the family for the sake of life and its completion for the sake of the good life. Aristotle says that a chief error in political philosophy is to confuse the household and the city as if they were differentiated only with the size, degree or number of the people involved. The associations have different forms and purposes that constitute an essential difference. The essential difference has to do above all with justice in a public space for deliberation (1252a32). Justice requires law and impartial deliberation and judgment. These are precisely the offices that must be arranged by each regime, according to its understanding of justice. The family exists through the private relationship of the husband and wife and children, a privacy which Plato wanted to destroy or absorb into the public sphere because he feared faction. Aristotle agrees that faction is a problem, but it has to do, not with the existence of the family, but with the properly political costs of differing notions of justice which pit the oligarch against the Democrat. And if one reads Thucydides, one can appreciate the polarity of Greek political life and the unending civil wars that raged through the Greek cities through the polarization of democracy and oligarchy, sponsored by the rivalry of Athens versus Sparta.

²⁰ Harry Jaffa, “What is Politics?” in *The Conditions of Freedom* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975). A reprinting of “Aristotle: 384-322 B.C.” in the Strauss-Cropsey *History of Political Philosophy*, 2nd edition, 1972.

One could say that Aristotle's critique of Plato, the excessive unity of city and the degradation of the individual, implicitly pervades Aristotle's *Politics*, especially in Book I. In Book II he explicitly attacks Plato's *Republic* on the community of wives and children and the abolishment of private property. Plato's errors have a common root problem which concerns human nature and the love of self and attachment to one's own. That attachment to one's own is a natural impulse; the problem comes with its excess.

The community of wives, children and property is, first of all, confusing if not incoherent. Aristotle makes an argument about the use of terms: when we say that everybody calls something mine, that could mean either that we all think the item is mine individually or mine as a member of the community. The problem, of course, is that if it is mine individually, we shall have intensified the same problem that we all want the same thing or claim the same thing (1261a18-23). If we all refer to the same thing as mine collectively, he says this has the problem of watering down our affection and care. So this is where he says he would rather be someone's real cousin than a "brother" in Plato's republic: "it is better to be someone's personal cousin than a son in the manner described" (1262a 14).

Human beings pay attention to what is their own: they care less for what is common. Plato means that each citizen will have 1000 sons: they will not be the sons of each citizen individual. Aristotle says that first, this probably is not possible because we will recognize resemblances; we can guess who are our brothers or fathers or mothers. And if it were possible, it would destroy natural piety, the source of restraint and special care. There are two things, he says, which move us to care for an object and to feel affection for that object, and one of them is that the object should belong to us. The other is that we should like it. And, he says, neither of these motives can exist in the schema of common ownership or community of wives and children.

As for property, he says that it is difficult for men to live together and be partners in any form of human activity, but it is especially difficult when property is involved because there will always be a discrepancy between the perceived amount of work and recompense. That's why he says a system of private ownership would be preferable, adorned, he says, by customs and laws that encourage common use. Common ownership also does away with the possibility of the virtues and of doing kindnesses and giving help to just friends or comrades.

The basic fallacy of Plato is the premise of unity: that there is the same extent of unity in the household and the *polis*. Advance the unity of the *polis* too far, and the *polis* will cease; it will lose its essence. Just like a harmony turned into mere units, there must be inner differentiation (1261a18-23).

Aristotle surely does a better job at accounting for the individual and the family than does Plato. Nevertheless, there remain significant problems with Aristotle's account. Some problems pertain to the nature of the political society itself; other problems pertain to the ultimate degradation of marriage and family. First, the status of the citizen is limited to male, Greek,

rationally-developed individuals. Slaves, mechanics, and others who work for the common good are not considered to be part of the higher life of the city. For example, Aristotle says that it would be unfitting for the mechanic to worship the gods of the city. If the family exists in its own integrity, it is ordered to the city as a higher association, and the city bears down on it with a certain arrogance. It looks to the family as a breeding ground from which it can pick and choose its citizens. And indeed, we find in Aristotle's *Politics* the notion that exposure of the defective child and abortion for limitation of the population are possibilities for the rational ordering of the city (1335b20-25). There is a hyper-masculinity to the city, as Hannah Arendt has so ably remarked. The institutional practice of homosexuality is not accidental to this account of the city.

Secondly, the problem of religion and worship is left to the creativity of the poet and the legislator. The city must assume permanence beyond family and nature, in quasi historical or mythical existence. The realm of honor and memory, monumental deeds, generate a new form of religion, a religion of the city. It is a form of idolatry. In addition, the family loses its distinctiveness through a series of problems. In the first place, the procreative act is the reproduction of the essentially same, the species, which is eternal (the personal or individual is lost). Nature reveals the endless cycles and eternal return of the same. The individual is ultimately of no account. Even though Aristotle appreciates the composite nature of things including the human, it is the eternal form that is intelligible and splendid. I recall the statement by Father Owens: "Aristotle was a Greek of the Greeks in his whole-souled concentration on the expression of form. More than any other of his race, he saw human life and every other activity and all Being centered in the clear and energetic realization of form."²¹ The realization of form refers to the realm of becoming, the world of nature. To understand nature we must appreciate material cause and the individual. But ultimately we return to universal form and the eternal standard. This is reflected in the Greek aesthetic. Oxford professor C. M. Bowra said that the aim of Greek art "was to present its subjects in their essential nature, in their timeless essence. . . . It appealed to their desire to find an abiding reality behind the gifts of the senses. . . . Artists sought to catch and express the essential nature of a subject, whether divine or human, high or humble, tragic or convivial, heroic or salacious, because they felt that the conviction of the beautiful which came to them in inexplicable and inspiring visitations was derived from a higher order of being and must be treated with a full awareness of its haunting and possessing presence. For this reason they presented in a special way what they saw, stripping it of its trivial or confusing accessories and concentrating on its inner strength and central being. . . . Artists and sculptors were no less concerned than he [Plato] was to find an ideal order behind appearances and to make it known to men."²² Again the differentiated individual does not measure up to the ideal form of the Greek art, nor is he or she worthy of celebration or remembrance.

In the second place, the city is the realm of freedom and the family represents the realm of necessity and mere life, reflecting a standing dualism. I was very struck by a brief account in Thucydides of the Athenian shrine at the island of Delos, said to be second in importance to the

²¹ Owens, *Doctrine of Being*, 470.

²² C. M. Bowra, *The Greek Experience* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson: 1957), Ch. 8, "The Plastic Vision."

Greek culture, behind Delphi. Thucydides writes: “Such was the importance of the island that in the 5th century, during the 6th year of the Peloponnesian war and under instruction from the Delphic Oracle, the entire island was purged of all dead bodies and it was decreed that no one should be allowed to either die or give birth on the island due to its sacred importance and to preserve its neutrality in commerce, since no one could then claim ownership through inheritance. Immediately after this purification, the first festival of the Delian games were celebrated there.”²³ To be happy and enter into the divine arena one must forget birth and death and discover the present bubble of splendor and play. The family represents precisely birth and death. It must be degraded if men are to be free and to rejoice in an unhampered freedom of play.

Third, the family must supply its sons to the city for its glory. We consider for example Pericles’ funeral speech. “Turning to the sons or brothers of the dead, I see an arduous struggle before you. When a man is gone, all are wont to praise him, and should your merit be ever so transcendent, you will still find it difficult not merely to overtake, but even to approach their renown. The living have envy to contend with, while those who are no longer in our path are honored with a goodwill into which rivalry does not enter. . . . If deeds be in question, those who are here interred have received part of their honors already, and for the rest, their children will be brought up till manhood at the public expense: the state thus offers a valuable prize, as the garland of victory in this race of valor, for the reward both of those who have fallen and their survivors. And where the rewards for merit are greatest, there are found the best citizens.”²⁴

We conclude our argument thus far by agreeing for the most part with Father Keefe. Dualism and degradation of the individual, the lack of history, the underlying despair are Greek phenomena, or even pagan phenomena, not simply “Platonic.” We see that even though Aristotle does much to affirm the goodness of creation, he is not at all able to locate the city in history, or to hope for real stability and permanence, or to expect the transformation of human life as it is bogged down or trapped in deficiency of matter and subject to the destructive trajectory of time. He, too, must look ultimately to the “pattern laid up in heaven.” Political life is the story of the erring cities. As Pascal remarked in his famous *pensée*: “If they [Plato and Aristotle] wrote about politics it was as if to lay down rules for a madhouse. And if they pretended to treat it as something really important it was because they knew that the madmen they were talking to believed themselves to be kings and emperors. They humored these beliefs in order to calm down their madness with as little harm as possible.”²⁵

Let me end this section with a passage from Chesterton confirming Keefe’s critique of the Greek, and Platonic, as a culture of despair. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton ends with this meditation:

²³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, III,104.

²⁴ Thucydides, *History*, II, 45-46.

²⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 112.

It is said that Paganism is a religion of joy and Christianity of sorrow; it would be just as easy to prove that Paganism is pure sorrow and Christianity pure joy. Such conflicts mean nothing and lead nowhere. . . . To the pagan the small things are as sweet as the small brooks breaking out of the mountain; but the broad things are as bitter as the sea. When the pagan looks at the very core of the cosmos he is struck cold. Behind the gods, who are merely despotic, sit the fates, who are deadly. Nay, the fates are worse than deadly; they are dead. And when rationalists say that the ancient world was more enlightened than the Christian, from their point of view they are right. For when they say “enlightened” they mean darkened with incurable despair. It is profoundly true that the ancient world was more modern than the Christian. The common bond is in the fact that ancients and moderns have both been miserable about existence, about everything, while mediaevals were happy about that at least. . . . But if the question turn on the primary pivot of the cosmos, then there was more cosmic contentment in the narrow and bloody streets of Florence than in the theatre of Athens or the open garden of Epicurus. Giotto lived in a gloomier town than Euripides, but he lived in a gayer universe.²⁶

Chesterton is able to give a delightful popular expression to a profound truth. We need to turn to the theological wisdom of Father Keefe to deepen his insight. Father Keefe is surely correct to assert that the Trinitarian God must be the prime analogate if we are to properly understand the dignity and freedom of human beings. I would like to conclude with some ideas from Blessed John Paul II on the freedom and dignity of the human person.

Reflections by John Paul II

How can we understand the ultimate failure or defeat of the ancient Greek humanism of Plato and Aristotle? Why do we still lose the significance of the differentiated individual and the importance of the family in the debate between Plato and Aristotle? It is in a very significant way a failure of the metaphysical order, stemming from these thinkers’ emphasis upon form and unity. Perhaps it is the failure of rationalism, the assertion of human rationality against the mystery and sovereignty of God, and so a manifestation of the fallen Adam. The true humanism will take nothing less than the restoration through the new Adam, an embrace of the true religion, and a metaphysics of *esse*, or metaphysics of the gift. Blessed John Paul II made some important contributions to this deepening of the integral humanism through his work on the phenomenology of love, through his work on *Gaudium et spes*, and through his work on the theology of the body and family which he developed during his papacy. He argues for the family as a “communion of persons,” reflecting and reiterating the “gift” of existence.

For all of the incisive arguments made by Aristotle for “man as political animal,” he did not quite reach the root cause. He had the notion of a common good and applied the notion of

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company: 1946), 294-295.

friendship to political life. He did not make explicit the theme of generosity and gift. Let us recap the three arguments: the city completes the family, a natural association; the city reveals man as a rational animal, with a capacity for deliberation and justice; the city is a whole that develops the individual as a part. Each of these arguments seems to turn more on the necessity of social and political association and indicate the neediness of human nature. Let's consider a very insightful paragraph from Jacques Maritain's *Person and the Common Good*:

But why is it that the person, as person, seeks to live in society? It does so, first, because of its very perfections, as person, and its inner urge to the communications of knowledge and love, which require relationship with other persons. In its radical generosity, the human person tends to overflow into social communications in response to the law of superabundance inscribed in the depths of being, life, intelligence and love. It does so secondly because of its needs or deficiencies, which derive from its material individuality. In this respect, unless it is integrated in a body of social communications, it cannot attain the fullness of its life and accomplishment. Society appears, therefore, to provide the human person with just those conditions of existence and development which it needs. It is not by itself alone that it reaches its plenitude but by receiving essential goods from society.²⁷

The second reason, from “needs or deficiencies,” takes into account the thrust of Aristotle’s argument in *Politics*. The acquisition of virtue, the maintenance of life and the cultivation of the good life, the role of law and deliberation about common advantage indicate the complex conditions needed for human flourishing. The human being is dependent on his fellows for the conditions of liberty, virtue, and overall development as a human. But did Aristotle, or Plato for that matter, thematize or make explicit the “radical generosity” of the human person? My teacher, Joe Evans, expressed Maritain’s insight this way: “inscribed in his very ontological structure man seeks to super-abundance and super-existence.”²⁸ One needs the metaphysics of the self-diffusion of the good. As Fr. Keefe remarked, who has heard of the self-diffusion of the “One”? Professor Evans also explained that the person asks for dialogue and seeks to “be with others.” The common good is rooted in the human capacity for communion with others in knowledge and truth. Maritain begins to make thematic the philosophy of “gift”: “Through love he can give himself freely to beings who are to him, as it were, other selves; and for this relationship no equivalent can be found in the physical world.”

Blessed John Paul II developed the theme of the gift-like character of existence and sought to make the philosophy of the gift the fundamental basis for marriage and family in the communion of persons. Aristotle was right to trace sociability, a political community, to the family association. But his understanding of it either looks too high, too low, or adjusts to the

²⁷ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (New York: Scribner, 1947), 47-48.

²⁸ Class notes from Joseph W. Evans, “Social and Political Philosophy,” University of Notre Dame, Fall 1972.

pragmatic or utilitarian needs of the city. The low view reflects natural impulse, prior to personal decision or deliberation, as an exercise of the animal powers of the soul. Human beings can see their own lack of self-sufficiency and their need for social association in the “pairing of male and female.” It is a rudimentary form of life requiring much support and transformation by the political society. The high view of procreation seeks explanation in the imitation of the eternal heavens and the separate substances through the perpetuation of the species. The eternal species achieves fuller substantial being, over time, than the individual as such. Both the Platonic idea and eternal species render the individual of derivative significance. Both the low and the high view of generation lose the distinctively human as well. The city does provide a more human measure for existence, situated in the *metaxy*, under the gods and above the animals. But the political excludes the less than fully rational and must use the offering up of families for the glory of the city. The few will remain in the honor of the city forever.

The rationale for social life in need and necessity obscures the deeper or true foundation of social life. When nature can be transformed, or needs redefined or met through various arrangements, the role of the family is questioned and the political order made utilitarian, influenced by a “culture of death.” In *Fides et ratio* John Paul II said: “The need for a foundation for personal and communal life becomes all the more pressing at a time when we are faced with the patent inadequacy of perspectives in which the ephemeral is affirmed as a value and the possibility of discovering the real meaning of life is cast into doubt” (§6). That foundation must be sought on a theological ground; but it is a ground confirmed by a phenomenological analysis and fully consistent with the Thomistic philosophy of the person. John Paul II finds the best formulation in *Gaudium et spes*:

Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, “that all may be one . . . as we are one” (John 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself. (§24)

The fundamental principle for human dignity is that God created each person for his or her own sake, as an end in itself. This does not provide an endorsement of moral powers for the underwriting of human autonomy. It is rather an affirmation of human dignity in light of its eternal destiny. But John Paul provides a more experiential basis for this understanding of human dignity in light of the family and the communion of persons. The family establishes an area of personal affirmation and understanding of the individual “in his or her uniqueness and unrepeatability”:

The contrast between the ordinariness of all the facts of the birth of human beings in human families and the extraordinariness and unrepeatability of each of those facts leads to another contrast, one that highlights the meaning of each concrete family as a communion of persons. It is precisely for such a community that the

fact of the birth of a human being is extraordinary and in each instance unique, as well as both personal and communal. Beyond this dimension, beyond the boundaries of the family, it loses this character and becomes a statistical fact, something to be subjected to various sorts of objectifications, up to the point of becoming merely a statistical entry. *The family is the place in which each human being appears in his or her own uniqueness and unrepeatability.* It is—and should be—the kind of special system of forces in which each person is important and needed because that person exists and because of who that person is. It is a profoundly *human* system, constructed upon the value of the person and concentrated entirely around this value.²⁹

The family therefore defies the intelligible as form and as universal precisely in its very reality as individuals in relation; and so its meaning will escape the philosopher. The role and importance of the family comes up at the points of birth and death, which are potentially no more than statistics for all but the family. The reality of the family emerges between a theological proposition (each is willed for his or her own sake) and an everyday or commonplace truth (the family embraces each member in his or her uniqueness and unrepeatability). We touch upon the mystery of the human person in birth and death. But between dogmatic assertion and a sentimental platitude, Wojtyla asks us to delve deeper into the mystery of life. The dynamic reality of marriage of spouses possesses significance greater than the “pairing of male and female” for the generation of new life in a twilight of passion and convenience. It reveals the human capacity for personal gift and energizes the root of all human society. Wojtyla says that humans are “like unto God” by reason of their capacity for community with other persons. Yet we have to go deeper than a “unit of social life”:

If we were to say that the actualization of this capacity and the confirmation of this truth about human beings is social life, this would be true, but it still would not capture the full depth that is proper and specific to this truth. Likewise, it would also be true to say that the family is a society, the smallest unit, but this would still not tell us much about the family and would fall short of the full ontological depth that we ought to discover and accentuate here.³⁰

Wojtyla will state the social is a point of arrival, rather than his point of departure (as it is for Aristotle). His point of departure is the person and the “structure proper to a person.” The structure or dynamism is self-possession and self-giving. “If the gift of oneself characterizes human activity, human conduct, it does so always because of this personal *esse*, which is capable of a disinterested gift of oneself.”³¹ The human “social nature” derives from the capacity for “rational community as *communio*”: the two “mutually contain and somehow imply one

²⁹ Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), “The Family as a Community of Persons,” in *Persons and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 316.

³⁰ Wojtyla, “The Family as a Community of Persons,” *Persons and Community*, 318.

³¹ Wojtyla, “The Family as a Community of Persons,” *Persons and Community*, 318-19.

another.” But *communio* is deeper than social nature, and it is “far more indicative of the personal and interpersonal dimension of all social systems.”³²

The *communio* of persons requires the disinterested gift of self and the reception of the gift. Like friendship, the *communio* must be a mutual affirmation of the other in each one’s gift. Wojtyla distinguishes between the communal as an adjective, the description of common action, and the communal as a “mode of being” or a disposition to confirm and reinforce the other in one’s gift. Thus marriage is the perfect realization of the *communio* as a mode of being, for the “nature of a community of persons demands that this gift be not only *given* but also *received in the whole of its truth and authenticity*,” that there must be a “genuine reception” of the gift or the “act through which the gift of the person is expressed.”³³ Marriage requires the mutual giving and reception of the gift of self over the course of a lifetime (until death do us part) and the exclusive commitment in totality of the self. Wojtyla thus coins the term a “theology of the body” to account for the significance of the sexually differentiated male and female as being most apt for *communio* and for the generation of new life, as an expansion of the *communio personarum*. Marriage as a *communio personarum* is “by nature open to these new persons, and through them it attains its proper fullness, not just in the biological or sociological sense, but precisely as a community with a truly communal character, a community that exists and acts on the basis of the bestowal of humanity and the mutual exchange of gifts.”³⁴

This phenomenological analysis reaches the purported root of human sociability. It is not reducible to any of the Aristotelian concepts, and it is capable of solving the Platonic question concerning the guardian. Aristotle would reduce the family to the natural or biological, as we have seen, either the achievement of the species in its endurance (no small thing) or to the neediness of passion and convenience (not at all evil aspects of sexuality and family, but not distinctively or essentially personal). Or Aristotle absorbs the family into the forms and purposes of the city as such with the result that a utilitarian approach overtakes the family in its readiness to serve the city. Wojtyla presents a deeper analysis to underscore the dignity of the person and the dynamic reality of self-giving, the radical generosity as the second aspect of human sociability, complementary to neediness.

The family does indeed feed the city primarily through the inner or spiritual formation of the person. John Paul II succinctly explains this in *Familiaris consortio*: “The family has vital and organic links with society, since it is its foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life: it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself” (§42). The animating principle of society he calls the “law of free-giving.” He explains how vital the family is in embodying and perpetuating the principle of society: “by respecting and fostering personal dignity in each and every one as the only basis for

³² Wojtyla, “The Family as a Community of Persons,” *Persons and Community*, 319.

³³ Wojtyla, “The Family as a Community of Persons,” *Persons and Community*, 322.

³⁴ Wojtyla, “The Family as a Community of Persons,” *Persons and Community*, 327.

value, this free giving takes the form of heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity” (§43). The higher values of society, such as justice, are rooted in the family communion of persons, which continues to serve as an “example and stimulus for the broader community relationships marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love” (§43). Maritain recognizes the importance of personal life as a basis for political life—“it is understandable that society cannot *live* without the perpetual gifts which come from persons, each one of whom is *irreplaceable* and incommunicable” even though society may well treat persons as replaceable.³⁵ In contemporary society the family may well be the only way to resist the allure of the anonymous escape mentioned above in the Fr. Keefe article. John Paul II comments: “faced with a society that is running the risk of becoming more and more depersonalized and standardized and therefore inhuman and dehumanizing, with the negative results of many forms of escapism—such as alcoholism, drugs and even terrorism—the family possesses and continues still to release formidable energies capable of taking man out of his anonymity, keeping him conscious of his personal dignity, enriching him with deep humanity and actively placing him, in his uniqueness and unrepeatability, within the fabric of society” (§43).

To conclude this paper, let me look to John Paul II’s confirmation of the major point made by Fr. Keefe. The prime analogate for being must be the Trinitarian God, not a monistic god of the Greeks or the uniform and pantheistic god of modern democracy.³⁶ The ultimate justification or true basis for understanding and practice of love as the disinterested gift of self is theological. He explains in his Apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*,

God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. (§11)

As Maritain spoke of radical generosity as “inscribed in the very ontological structure” of human beings as tending towards super-abundance and super-existence, we can appreciate why Christian theology makes it possible for this theme to be made explicit and why the vocation to love and communion in marriage is the sure sign of it.

³⁵ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, Ch. IV: The Person and Society, <http://www3.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/text/CG04.HTM>.

³⁶ Perhaps it may be of interest to read Tocqueville’s spirited aside that “All those who still appreciate the true nature of man’s greatness should combine in the struggle against it [pantheism].” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 452. Pantheism combines that loss of individual existence and confidence with the deification of generality and the mass of men.

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